New Understanding of Temporal Interpretations in the Chinese Language

Sherry Yong Chen

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Time in Language

- **Time:**
  - An immediate human experience

- **Language:**
  - How do we express time in different languages?
  - What’s special about Chinese?
- Aliens: a written language of complicated circular symbols
- As Louise becomes more proficient, she sees the future
- The alien language changes her mind’s perception of time
Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

- aka Linguistic Relativity
  - “The structure of a language affects its speakers’ world view”
  - But…… do we actually perceive the world differently?
- How do languages differ in terms of temporal expressions?
  - More commonalities or differences?
Roadmap

- Time Interpretations in English
- “Tenseless” Languages? The Case of Chinese
- Lifetime Effects (aka. lessons we learn from Trump)
- Revisiting the Notion of Tense
- Implications for Language Pedagogy
Time Interpretations in English

- **Adverbials**
  - last week, three years ago
  - today, now

- **Predicates**
  - be happy, be busy
  - have blue eyes

- **Aspectual markers**
  - progressive: V-ing
  - completive: have V-ed

- **Tense**
  - It *is* raining
  - It rained
Tense

- “Grammatical expression of temporal reference”
- Past, Present, Future?

- How many tenses are there in English?
  - Morphologically: V and V-ed
  - English is more sensitive to the distinction between Past vs. Non-Past
  - In fact, languages typically makes a two-way distinction
Tenseless languages (?)

- But what does it even mean?

- Is such a language easier to learn? Or is there some kind of “hidden complexity”…….

- A “classic” example: Mandarin Chinese
Time Interpretations in Chinese

- Adverbials
- Aspectual markers
- Predicates

- Default viewpoint
  - progressive: *zai*
  - completive: *guo, le*

- Tense?
  zuotian/jintian, Mali zai xue-xi
  Yesterday/Today, Mary PROG study
  ‘Yesterday/Today, Mary was/is studying.’
What does tense do?

- How do we use tense to guide temporal interpretation in our daily conversation?
In which Trump discovers some guy named Frederick Douglass

President Trump is capable of many a miracle. On Wednesday, after just 12 days on the job, he raised the dead.

Addressing a small group of African American aides and supporters to kick off Black History Month, the new president not only offered pro forma praise for the usual suspects — Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr. — but also singled out somebody who recently caught his attention.

“Frederick Douglass,” Trump said, “is an example of somebody who’s done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more, I notice.”
Lifetime Effects

- Mary *is* from California

- John *had* blue eyes

- Sentences like these give rise to inferences about the life/death of individual(s) in the subject position
  - Past tense for the dead, present tense for the living

- **Contradictory lifetime inferences:**
  - They *are*/*were* both from California
What about tenseless languages?

- By default, Chinese verbs admit both past and present interpretations

  aiyinsitan  he  huojin  dou  shi  wulixuejia
  Einstein  and  Hawking  both  BE  physicist
  ‘Einstein and Hawking both BE physicists.’

- Perfectly grammatical in Chinese, although not quite translatable…….
Context: Holly, a British actress, will give birth to her first baby in New York. Her assistant, Georgia, had her baby in California last month.

- English: Both of their babies \#are\#will be American citizens
- Chinese: ta-men de xiaohai dou #shi meiguo gongmin

3PL POSS child both BE America citizen

‘Their babies both \#BE American citizens.’
The “Future” in Chinese

- Future references require some kind of extra “explicit marking”

- zuotian/jintian, Mali zai Shanghai
  yesterday/today Mary in Shanghai
  ‘Yesterday/Today, Mary was/is in Shanghai.’

- mingtian, Mali jiang/hui zai Shanghai
  tomorrow Mary FUT in Shanghai
  ‘Tomorrow, Mary will be in Shanghai.’
Revisiting Tense in Chinese

- We know that Chinese is not sensitive to the distinction between the past and the present

- “Forward lifetime effects”: Future vs. Non-future

- Perhaps Chinese does have tense after all!

- This also explains the “Einstein and Hawking” example: both are in the “Non-Future”
Tense: a Language Universal?

- Perhaps all the so-called “tenseless” languages also have tenses, just in a slightly different way from the one in English.

- Our traditional view on tense has been very much influenced by the focus on Indo-European languages in the literature.
what studying languages is like

**latin:** words like 'yes' and 'no' aren't important. memorize these 3000 different ways to talk about killing people though because you will use them

**greek:** hello naughty students it's participle time

**egyptian:** ancient pictionary

**french:** pronouncing every letter is for chumps

**german:** let's combine every other word together to create the U L T I M A T E F R A N K E N W O R D

**mandarin:** lol what's a verb tense

**spanish:** LOL WHAT ISN'T A VERB TENSE
Implications for Language Pedagogy

- Teaching Chinese to English speakers
  - Mandarin Chinese is becoming an increasingly popular choice for foreign language learners
- Complexity of teaching temporal interpretations
  - Call attention to the special status of “future”
  - Non-future: “default viewpoint rule”
Thank you!

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Contact:
Website: sherrychen.org
Twitter: @linguistsherry
Email: yong.chen@lincoln.ox.ac.uk